

The mystery of Christ's human knowledge

Last month we reflected on the teaching of Pope Francis and Pope Pius XI on how our sins, committed even now, contributed to Christ's agony, because individually foreseen by him; yet how our *consolations* offered even now contributed, because foreseen by him, to the comfort of soul he received even during his agony. In relation to that, we looked at the Church's teaching on Christ, in his human soul, knowing *each one of us* during his life, agony and Passion. As we saw, this was in virtue of his having the beatific vision, the immediate knowledge of the Father.

We recall his own words: 'No one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' (*Mt* 11:27; cf. *Lk* 10:22; *Jn* 1:18; 6:46) Easily enough we might simply think, 'Well, Jesus is God – of course he knew the Father.' This is true, yet the complete truth has some more layers.

Since Christ is fully God and fully man, he has both the *unlimited divine mind* that he possesses with the Father and the Holy Spirit (by which he eternally knows all things); and the *limited human mind* that he possesses in virtue of being truly human, with a true human soul and body. What he expressed through his human body, in human language, was his human knowledge.

Some people, upon realising this, jump to the conclusion that Jesus (at least in his human nature) must therefore have been ignorant about all sorts of things, even religious; that maybe he was even sometimes in error and we, much wiser, need to correct him. (This would all supposedly be part of our 'truly acknowledging his humanity'.) The Catholic Church has rejected this over-simplified idea.

Certainly, the Son of God became 'a man like us in all things but sin'. That means he had everything *essential* to human nature, such as body, soul, human mind, human free will, emotions, senses. Yet because of his human nature being united in his one person to the divine nature, in various ways his human life and existence were hardly *ordinary* (and otherwise, no one would have any reason to even follow him). Yes, some things were ordinary (such as his hidden life at Nazareth) but other things not. So: to be the Son of God; to be born of a virgin; to work miracles; to die and rise for our salvation – these things, while not at all in *contradiction* to possessing the true essence of human nature, are obviously not 'typical'.

We see something similar with his human knowledge. On the one hand, it was indeed finite, not infinite; and with his human senses, brain and soul he did acquire knowledge in a human way. (Cf. *Lk* 2:52; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 472) Yet at the same time, 'by its union to the divine wisdom in the person of the Word incarnate, Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal.' (*Catechism* n. 474)

The beatific 'vision of the Father' that Jesus had in his human knowledge from the moment of the Incarnation (cf. DS 3812) is not against true humanity. Indeed, that vision is God's intention for *every* human being: all those who reach heaven will possess it. Furthermore, Christ's possession of that vision is the *source and principle* of our own vision of the Father – by faith here on earth, in clear sight in eternity. From Our Lord's own words, this is central to salvation: 'No one knows the Father except the Son *and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*'

A recent document of the Holy See, correcting a certain theologian, emphasised that Christ during his life on earth could not himself be said to have had *faith*. (Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification*, 26/11/2006) The direct knowledge of the Father that he possessed in his human soul went beyond the knowledge of faith (which of its nature has a degree of obscurity). Faith believes what we do not yet see, whereas Our Lord already had the spiritual *sight* of the Father. (Consequently, we can add, it is Mary, not Jesus, who is our perfect model of having faith, in the precise sense of that term; cf. *Catechism* nn. 148-49.)

So the Holy See declared: ‘The filial and messianic consciousness of Jesus is the direct consequence of his ontology [*i.e. innermost being*] as Son of God made man. If Jesus were a believer like ourselves... he would not be able to be the true Revealer showing us the face of the Father... Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, enjoys an intimate and immediate knowledge of his Father, a “vision” that certainly goes beyond the vision of faith... It is precisely the intimacy and the direct and immediate knowledge which he has of the Father that allows Jesus to reveal to men the mystery of divine love.’ (*Notification* 8)

On today’s Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, we can also reflect on what Jesus’ vision of the Father means in relation to his Passion. St John Paul II wrote in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001): ‘There is no doubt that already in his historical existence Jesus was aware of his identity as the Son of God... Not even the drama of his Passion and Death will be able to shake his serene certainty of being the Son of the heavenly Father...’ (24)

‘We shall never exhaust the depths of this mystery. All the harshness of the paradox can be heard in Jesus’ seemingly desperate cry of pain on the Cross: ... “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (*Mk* 15:34)’ (25)

‘Jesus’ cry on the Cross... is not the cry of anguish of a man without hope, but the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father in love, for the salvation of all. At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, “abandoned” by the Father, he “abandons” himself into the hands of the Father. His eyes remain fixed on the Father. Precisely because of the knowledge and experience of the Father which he alone has, even at this moment of darkness he sees clearly the gravity of sin and suffers because of it. He alone, who sees the Father and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father’s love by sin. More than an experience of physical pain, his Passion is an agonising suffering of the soul.’ (26)

‘Theological tradition has not failed to ask how Jesus could possibly experience at one and the same time his profound unity with the Father, by its very nature a source of joy and happiness, and an agony that goes all the way to his final cry of abandonment. The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects is rooted in the fathomless depths of the hypostatic union [*i.e. the union of human and divine natures in the one divine person*].’ (26)

St John Paul draws here upon ‘the lived theology of the saints’, including the ‘illuminating testimony’ of St Thérèse of Lisieux, who ‘lived her agony in communion with the agony of Jesus, “experiencing” in herself the very paradox of Jesus’s own bliss and anguish.’ He quotes her words: “In the Garden of Olives our Lord was blessed with all the joys of the Trinity, yet his dying was no less harsh. It is a mystery, but I assure you that, on the basis of what I myself am feeling, I can understand something of it” (*Last Conversations*).’ (27)

The Pope concludes by returning to the Gospel testimony: ‘Even in the depths of his pain, [Christ] died imploring forgiveness for his executioners and expressing to the Father his ultimate filial abandonment: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”.’ (27)